

The Strange Case of Dr. Pietro d'Abano or Things Really Could Be Much Worse

Whenever we feel the need to lower our heads in collective depression and despair, we take heart from the simple fact that things can always be worse. To reaffirm this fact of our cruel and unjust life, it helps if we remind ourselves of the imminent Italian physician and philosopher, the venerable Dr. Pietro d'Abano. The most obvious difference between Dr. P and us is we are alive and poor Dr. Pietro is dead. Long dead. He died around 1316. Almost seven centuries ago. This fact alone should be enough to raise our leaden spirits up out of our collective slumber and into the realm of ignorant bliss as we realize it is far better to be alive than dead. However, this argument is also somewhat weak in that it can only be argued from the vantage point of the living, since the dead don't usually debate. Or at least very well. If we were all Buddhists at this point there would be far more logic than we need for proof; but we're not, so it isn't. Coming from the Judeo-Christian tradition of 'every tiny little thing is such a very big pain'; we can't let it go so easily. In fact, we can't let anything go very easily. It's what we do best; hoard stuff. The good news back then was that Dr. Pietro was a respected professor of Medicine at Padua and was partially responsible for elevating the noble concept of medicine above the superstitious back alleys of sorcery and witchcraft. The bad news is he was tried for heresy and practicing magic by the Inquisition. In fact, it really could have been magic after all since this was some 600 years before penicillin. But the good news was that our Dr. Pietro was acquitted and freed, no small feat for that day and time. The bad news was he was later charged again with heresy and tried again. The good news was that he had already beaten the previous charges. The really bad news was he died during the second trial. We don't know the cause of death because the Inquisition did not favor autopsies for obvious reasons. But before even any last rites consideration, Dr. P's friends, being the typical uninformed blockheads of the early 1300's, stole his body thinking that the corpse housed something akin to the soul or spirit and was in effect the essence of man or in this case, Dr. Pietro himself incarnate. When the good Dr. P. was later convicted of his heinous crimes, he was ordered burned at the stake, the usual and customary sentence for such an offense as practicing magic. No big deal. However, since he was dead and his cadaver had vanished, he was ordered burned in effigy, the same or at least very similar thing. So if in fact the sick and fever ridden Don Pietro had realized he was going to die during his second trial, he also knew his good buddies would more than likely scarf the cadaver to prevent the Inquisitors from inquisitioning it. He also knew he would then be ordered burned in effigy which he somehow would equate with great importance and still thusly die a fearful, dejected and despondent man. Had our Dr. Pietro only known what we the modernly civilized know. Had Dr. P been enlightened he would have told the judge to do whatever the court wants with his vile cadaver. Modern medicine and modern science has now determined just when the whole thing called life ceases to exist and that point is called the time and date on the death certificate. Death certificates are equal opportunity for all since we all get one, just like the birth one; we are stamped coming in and stamped going out. Having been burned in effigy, it is unclear whether Dr. P. got one going out or not. So of course this begs the existential question: Can human knowledge that came after Dr. Pietro's era then be integrated into Dr. Pietro's ongoing spiritual psyche thus causing it to be nurtured and developed even after his untimely yet expected death? Whew. The short answer is no but that has never stopped extremists like Don Pietro. For all we know he could still be around so don't be surprised if he shows up at your next potluck or office social. We can't actually say for sure that he wasn't one of those sorcerers with one of those pointed hats...but we can say that he probably stepped way outside the accepted bounds of normalcy for his day and time. It probably wasn't a hard thing to do, remember, Columbus was still two centuries away. It's a good guess there is a physical law or rule somewhere that says you can't keep on learning, growing and developing after you are dead. As of yet, there is no proof since there is not much reliable information that has been obtained from dead people. However, it does appear that thanks to the efforts of oddballs like Dr. Pietro D'Abano we are somehow better off today. For instance, we won't be arrested for practicing magic which despite the best efforts of the Inquisition is no longer a crime. Wonder what Don Pietro would say about that. It is hard to imagine a world without vaccines and public health and a world where burning in effigy really meant something. "And as punishment Your Honor, I recommend the State burn the dead carcass of my miserable client. But until then, it's party time, OK, Your Honor?" Today we call it cremation. Such is good and bad, life and death. And the evolving concept of justice. But hey admit it, after comparing your problems to those of the departed Dr. Pietro, just what exactly is your gripe? And go ahead and admit it, after comparing your situation with that of Dr. Pietro D'Abano, don't you feel better now?

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